

# Blue-collar Port Orchard parish is 'spiritually rich'

Diverse St. Gabriel community has bonded through capital campaign

PORT ORCHARD  
 BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

St. Gabriel Parish has been experiencing something of a renaissance in recent years, and many parishioners see the spark behind it in Sister Deanna Carr of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is now in her sixth year as pastoral coordinator for the parish.



Sister Deanna Carr

"I cannot say enough wonderful things about her," said 26-year parishioner and former pastoral council chair Susan Whitford. "She is absolutely fantastic. She's just an awesome person to work with. I think that she has tremendous skills in terms of bringing people together, in terms of listening to people ... She's just always got a positive, upbeat attitude."

"Sister's been kind of a masterful orchestra conductor," said parishioner Ron Testa, "keeping everybody using all their talents to the best of their ability."

Parishioners point variously to the vibrant choir, youth group, welcoming committee and St. Vincent de Paul Society, among other groups, as signs of parishioners' eagerness to get involved and serve the community.

The parish community is very generous, always ready to "step forward" and help out in time of need, said Sister Deanna. "Over the past several years we've sometimes had bad storms on the Kitsap peninsula," she said, "and there have been some emergency situations brought to our attention, and all I've had to do is walk into church and look at somebody and say, 'Could you help with this?' And nobody ever said, 'No, I can't' or 'We're too busy' or 'This isn't the right time for us.' They're very, very willing to

step up, especially in situations of need."

Parochial vicar Father Thomas Park and Father Donald Perea attend to the sacramental needs of the ethnically diverse parish, which includes large Filipino and Guamanian communities.

## Capital campaign unites parish

St. Gabriel is in the final year of a three-year capital campaign to raise funds for several improvements to the parish campus, including seismic upgrades to the religious education building, renovation of the parish social hall and improvements to the worship space, including a new choir area and baptismal immersion font.

The parish set a goal of \$910,000, significantly more than a consulting firm told them they could reasonably expect to raise, but they are already close to their goal with more than eight months to go before the campaign ends next June. "I know that's much more modest than some parishes would aspire to," said Sister Deanna, "but ours is a middle-class, working people's parish, by and large, and raising this amount of money has been challenging."

"We don't have lots of rich retirees that are carrying the load here," explained Testa, "just blue-collar folks."

The capital campaign has been a true community effort that has brought the parish together spiritually and, at times, physically. "It's had an incredible effect and been a real coming together of our parish community," said Testa. "It has bonded us more than any other event in the 20 years or so since I've been coming to St. Gabriel's Parish."

Parishioners patiently bore the inconvenience and discomfort of being displaced on Sundays while work was being done in the worship space.

"For a considerable amount of time during the summer, we were all knee-to-knee in the social hall for Masses," said Sister Deanna, "and we got very close in that experience, and sometimes very warm."

But all the sacrifice, financial and otherwise, has been worth it, said Sister Deanna.

## St. Gabriel, Port Orchard

PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. GABRIEL PARISH



St. Gabriel today

**Founded:** 1949

**Households:** 887

**Priest Moderator:** Father Jack Buckalew

**Street Address:**

1150 Mitchell Ave.,  
 Port Orchard, WA  
 98366-4416

**Phone:** 360-876-2762

**Web site:**

[home.wavecable.com/~stgabrielchurch](http://home.wavecable.com/~stgabrielchurch)

## Pastors:

Father Timothy Moynihan 1949

Father John Donohoe 1952

Father James van Gogh 1966

Father Francis Xavier Murphy 1970

Father Donald Piro 1971

Father Pat O'Neill 1976

Father Dennis Sevilla 1987

Father Jerry McCloskey 2000

Father Jeffrey Sarkis

2003 (priest moderator)

Father Jack Buckalew

2005 (priest moderator)

"They're really thrilled with the renovation," she said. "People have expressed happiness and delight."

## "We started in a chicken coop"

St. Gabriel traces its history to World War II, when "the Army came to South Kitsap to help protect the Bremerton Navy Yard from possible Japanese air attack," according to a parish history. Port Orchard Catholics who had been attending Mass at Our Lady Star of the Sea Parish in Bremerton began to go to Retsil Veterans Home, where Army chaplain Father William Cunningham was celebrating Masses.

In 1942, Father James Buck was assigned to celebrate Sunday Masses in Port Orchard, which he did in the hall above the D & R Theatre and at the East Port Orchard Gymnasium, which were less than ideal locations. In 1944, the growing Catholic community in Port Orchard became a mission of Our Lady Star of the Sea, and in 1947 a 12-acre parcel of land known as Buntan Ranch was bought for \$6,000. There was only one usable building on the property.

"We started in a chicken coop — that's part of our colorful beginning," said Sister Deanna. "Actually, I shouldn't say we started in a chicken coop — the first rectory was a chicken coop, which is even worse."

The community also bought a gov-

ernment-owned day care center across the street from their new property for a nominal sum and used it as a temporary church building.

In June of 1949, the Port Orchard Mission officially became a parish, and took the name St. Gabriel. Father Timothy Moynihan was appointed as the first pastor and took up residence in "The Poultry Penthouse." In 1952 he was replaced by Father John Donohoe, who would be pastor of St. Gabriel Parish for the next 14 years.

In 1957, construction began on a church building, which was dedicated in the spring of 1958, and in 1963 the parish finally gave Father Donohoe a real rectory.

In the early 1970s, under the leadership of Father Donald Piro, the St. Gabriel community employed several creative fundraisers in order to build an education center, which was dedicated in 1973. And in 1980, St. Gabriel, which had begun as a mission itself 36 years earlier, established the Prince of Peace Mission in Belfair.

Today, the solidly blue-collar parish community continues to build on the foundation of faith that was laid more than 60 years ago.

"Our parish is not a very wealthy parish," said parishioner Tim Thomson. "However, I would say, spiritually we're rich."



St. Gabriel's original rectory, a converted chicken coop, was known as "The Poultry Penthouse."

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